

Fort San Geronimo
San Juan, Puerto Rico

HABS-PR-49

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
SAN JUAN, PUERTO RICO

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
San Juan National Historic Site

HABS-49
Page No. 1

THE FORT OF SAN GERONIMO
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Owner: The Municipality of San Juan

Date of Erection: The present structure is built on the location of an earlier fort and may incorporate parts of it. The exact building date of the present structure is not known. Its completion date is given as 1788 and 1771 by Adolfo de Hostos and Edward A. Hoyt, respectively. In 1799 it was reconstructed without alterations, according to Adolfo de Hostos. In the report dated 31 December, 1801 on the construction and repairs of the fortification by Tomas Sedeño, demolition and reconstruction work was performed on San Gerónimo.

Builder: According to Adolfo de Hostos it was built under the direction of the Military Engineer Ignacio Mascaro de Homar, who may also have been the architect. The construction proper was performed by the Spanish Corps of Engineers.

Present Condition: Present state of preservation is poor. The foundations of the bridge leading to San Geronimo are badly eroded and undercut, and the aprons under the bridge have disintegrated. Along the sea side of the fort there are minor breaks with consequent erosion.

Structural failures of the fortification walls exist in three areas: in the East wall, and at the Southeast and Southwest corner of San Geronimo respectively. In all three places continuous cracks extend from base to top of wall, varying in width from 1/16" to 3". The cracks appear old and are filled with loose material lodged there by seepage.

All walls are badly eroded and are in need of repointing and refinishing. In the sentry box on the North side, in the houses Nos. 1 and 2 and in the South side of the bridge they are in a ruinous state.

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The beams supporting the roofs over house No. 1, the floor and the roof of house No. 2, the portico and the roof over rooms nos. 3 and 4 have been attacked by rot and termites where they are anchored in the walls, necessitating brackets and auxiliary supports. Over the portico and rooms nos. 3 and 4 the beams have given away in four areas causing breaks in the brick roof. The floor in House No. 2 has disintegrated in the same manner.

All pavements are in poor condition. On the gun deck it is practically gone. On the ramps and in the forecourt the original pavement of hard mortar with a brick aggregate is still in existence, but has many holes and cement patches.

The drains have been blocked at two points on the upper level where modern gun tracks have been installed and all along the North wall. On the lower level the drains have disintegrated at the gate and where it enters cistern No. 2. In rooms nos. 4 and 5 the outlets are blocked.

It can be assumed that cistern No. 1 is not functioning since no flow of water has been observed from it during the period of the survey. Cistern No. 2 is partly filled with rubble and, as mentioned above, the drains leading to the cisterns are damaged.

The following departures from the original structure are known. Two embrasures on the north side of gun deck have been walled up at an unknown date. The date is also unknown of the modifications to two of the gun positions on the upper level. Edward A. Hoyt assumes them to have been put in during the Spanish period. The first building to contain the commanding officers quarters is known to have been destroyed in 1898 during the hurricane of San Ciriaco. A later structure built on its site was torn down in 1948. A number of plumbing lines installed between 1921 and

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1948 can be traced in the forecourt. None of the lines are connected, nor are they in a working condition. A small boat pier was built some time after 1921.

Number of
Stories:

There are two main levels. The upper one, the gun deck, is connected by two ramps with the forecourt. All ramps and vaults with exception of room No. 7 and cistern No. 2 are on the level of the forecourt. These are $1\frac{1}{2}'$ and $6'$ lower than the forecourt.

Materials of
Construction:

The fort is built on a sandstone bedrock. The lower and outer walls are constructed from the same sandstone cut in blocks approximately $16" \times 18" \times 32"$ and laid in courses. The heavier walls and shell walls with a rubble fill core. Breast walls and interior walls are generally rubble masonry in a lime mortar, probably set up in forms. Brick was used throughout for lining, copings vaults and arches, and in one instance for an interior wall. Roofs are brick on asubo beams on lime concrete on barrel vaulting. Three sizes of brick were observed: $1" \times 5\frac{1}{4}" \times 10\frac{1}{2}"$, $2" \times 5\frac{1}{4}" \times 10\frac{1}{2}"$ and $1\frac{1}{2}" \times 6" \times 12"$. Pavements and walking surfaces are a hard lime mortar with a burnt clay and brick fragment aggregate. All walls were originally covered with a lime stucco. Traces of lime wash can be observed on the structures facing the forecourt.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY OF SAN GERONIMO FORT

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Existing
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collection of documents is the main source available for the history of San Geronimo Fort. Volumes and pages have been enumerated to facilitate any research.)

2. Blanco, Enrique T., Los Tres Ataques Británicos a la Ciudad de San Juan Bautista de Puerto Rico. San Juan, Puerto Rico, 1947, 72, 73, 76, 78, 79, 86, 91, 94, 96, 104, 109, 111, 113, 115, 118, 119, 120, 121, 124. (An account of the British attack of 1797, based on the Castro's diary.)
3. Brau, Salvador, Historia de Puerto Rico. D. Appleton & Co., New York, 1914, 197, 207, 210, 211, 212. (It has some information about its function during the attack of 1797.)
4. Bureau of Public Works, Report relating to the ownership of land and buildings on the island which constitutes the principal part of the city of San Juan, Puerto Rico. Document no. 2, 1st. part: List of Properties and Buildings, 1901. (A very short paragraph-typewritten report in our office.)
5. Casablanca Report, U. S. A. Engineers, 1934. (Type-written report in our office. Contains a brief summary.)
6. Castaños y Montijano, Manuel, Defensa de la Ciudad de Puerto Rico en 1797. Estudio histórico-militar de tan glorioso hecho de armas. Revista Técnica de Infantería y Caballería Press, Madrid, 1916, 19 pages. (Covers the attack of 1797. Typewritten report in our office.)
7. "El Mundo," daily newspaper published in San Juan since 1919. The following numbers and pages: 3110/1, 3325/3, 3361/1, 3370/1, 3465/1, 5667/1, 2363/2, 2544/1, 2813/1, 2871/3, 3262/2, 4062/3. (An excellent account of the transfer of San Geronimo Fort to Commander Baker after World War I.)

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8. Hostos, Adolfo de, Ciudad Murada. Editorial Lex, La Habana, 1948, 70, 71, 72, 179, 196, 197. (It contains good general information about the Fort.)
9. Hoyt, Edward A., A History of the Harbor Defenses of San Juan under Spain, 1509-1898, etc., San Juan, Puerto Rico, 1943, 44, 52, 53, 59, 75, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 97, 98, 100, 101, 149, 150-153. (The best summary of the history of the Fort is found in the last three pages mentioned above.)
10. Lealtad y Heroismo de la isla de Puerto Rico, 1797. Lynn e Hijos de Perez Moris Press, San Juan, Puerto Rico, 1897, 10, 11, 22, 23, 75, 91, 137, 145, 146, 185, 186, 196, 202, 203, 204, 205, 212, 215, 217, 218, 235, 314, 316. (Account of the attack of 1797.)
11. Ledru Andres, Pedro, Viaje a la Isla de Puerto Rico en 1797. Translation of Julio L. de Viscarrondo, 1863, 89, 90, 125, 126, 128, 131 n-1, 140, 143, 151. (Account of British attack of 1797.)
12. Memoria sobre el estado actual de las Fortificaciones, 1839. (Typewritten report in our office. Gives some facts about the construction of the Fort.)
13. Middledyk, R. A. Van, History of Puerto Rico, 139, 141. (Casual references about the Fort.)
14. Miller, Paul G., History of Puerto Rico. Rand Mc Nally & Co., Chicago, 1922, 221-234. (Account of attack of 1797.)
15. Neuman Gandía, Eduardo, Gloriosa Epopeya. Sitio de los ingleses de 1797, con datos hasta ahora no publicados. La Libertad Press, Ponce, Puerto Rico, 1897, 269-334 contains information about the British attack of 1797.
16. "Patriotismo de D. Ramon de Castro y demás heroicos defensores de Puerto Rico," in Benefactores y hombres notables de Puerto Rico. Ponce, Puerto Rico, 1896, vol. 1, 269. (Diary of de Castro.)

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17. Relación de Fortificación. Property of Rafael W. Ramírez de Arellano. (States the fact that the Fort was reconstructed in 1794.)
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21. Ubeda y Delgado, Manuel, Isla de Puerto Rico. Tip. del Boletín Mercantil, San Juan, Puerto Rico, 1878, 16, 17, 118. (Little information.)
22. Van Deusen, Richard James and Van Deusen, Elizabeth Kneipple, Puerto Rico, a Caribbean Island. 81-84 deals with English attack of 1797.

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Other Existing
Records (Cont.)

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A LISTING OF PICTORICAL MATERIAL AT PRESENT AVAILABLE ON
SAN GERONIMO

(The list is extracted from all maps, charts, etc. in the possession of or available to the National Park Service at San Juan NHS)

- 1600 (Approx.) Plano del Ataque de Cumberland del original en la narración de Lady Ann en 1600 (El Fuerte Matadiablo)

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- 1747 Mapa de la Plaza de San Juan de Puerto Rico y sus contornos, etc.
Francisco Fernández Valdelomar (Fuerte de San Gerónimo)
- 1765 Plano de la Plaza de San Juan de Puerto Rico, Don Manuel Miguel de León (Fuerte de San Gerónimo)
- 1772 Plano de la Plaza de San Juan de Puerto Rico, Tomas O'Daly. (Casa Fuerte de San Gerónimo)
- 1776 Mapa de la Plaza de San Juan de Puerto Rico, su Bahía sondeada, Playa, etc. Abril 27, 1776, Tomas O'Daly
- 1784 Plano del Puerto de la Ysla de Puerto Rico delineado por D. José María Sánchez, bajo la corrección de D. Pedro Rivelles.
- 1785 Plano de Puerto Rico
Dale Luz - Don Tomás López, Madrid
(Castillo de San Geronimo)
- 1785 Copia del Nuevo Plano de Puerto Rico, Nov. 1785, diseñado y registrado del orden de Don Joseph Montero Spinoso, Comandante del nombrado S. Felipe.
- 1795 Plano de Puerto Rico - Drawn by Don Manuel Burgos for the Royal Spanish Navy, Oct. 1795. (Measurements taken in Puerto Rico in 1782)
- 1795 La Ciudad en 1797 - Campeche (San Juan during the attack of Abercromby)
- 1851 Isla de Puerto Rico. Insert San Juan by Teniente Coronel, Capt. of Ingenieros Francisco Coello and Don Pascual Madoz, Madrid, 1851. (Fuerte de San Geronimo)
- 1871 Plano de la Zona Extramuros de la Ysla donde se halla asentada. Evaristo de Churruca.
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- 1881 Plano de la Plaza de San Juan de Puerto Rico. Levantado por el Cuerpo de Ingenieros Militares para el estudio de las nuevas defensas de la misma.
- 1887 Plano de la Plaza de San Juan de Puerto Rico. Levantado por el Cuerpo de Ingenieros Militares - copia del original.
- 1873 Plano de la Ciudad de San Juan de Puerto Rico. El Ingeniero Jefe, marzo 15, 1873.
- 1900 Album of Puerto Rico by Lopez Cepero
- 1948 Government of Puerto Rico, Department of Education Photographic collection.

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Additional
Data:

MISCELLANEOUS OBSERVATIONS

Following observations were made while surveying San Geronimo:

The Fort is equipped with two kitchens, one in room No. 2 and one in room No. 6. The latter still has its chimney. In room No. 2 there are signs of a large hood over the bench cooking shelf.

The fort has two cisterns. No. 1 contained the drinking water. It is fed from the roofs over rooms Nos. 3 and 4 and the portico, and it was emptied through a well in the forecourt.

Cistern No. 2 contained water for washing and bathing purposes. Its bottom is approximately 1' above the main low water level, and it is fed from the forecourt and the ramps.

House No. 2 served as the latrine. The sewage was washed away at high tides.

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Additional
Data (Cont.)

BRIEF HISTORY

San Geronimo Fort is located at the easternmost point of the islet of San Juan extending about 250 feet into the inlet called El Boqueron, which connects the Atlantic Ocean and San Juan Bay through San Antonio Channel. The mission of San Geronimo was to protect this second entrance to the San Juan harbor and repel invasion from the island of Puerto Rico.

The fortification of El Boqueron Point is mentioned¹ for the first time by Governor Diego Menendez de Valdes (1582-1593) in his report to the Junta de Puerto Rico in 1587.² According to the report Menendez fortified the Boqueron Point with a platform and a trench big enough to emplace 6 artillery pieces.³

In 1591 Captain Pedro de Salazar, who was commissioned to carry out a plan of fortification designed by the military engineer Juan Bautista Antonelli razed all works, redoubts and trenches built by Governor Valdes on the eastern part of the islet of San Juan.⁴ As proved later by Drake's and Cumberland's attacks, 1595 and 1598 respectively, the action of Salazar was a

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military blunder because the key to the defense of San Juan rested in the impregnability of the land approaches.

Between 1591 and 1595 many temporary positions were constructed, and one of them was at El Boqueron.

During Drake's attack it and San Antonio bridge were defended with 4 pieces of ordnance and 150 men, out of the total of 15 pieces of artillery and 400 men who were stationed at the eastern batteries of the island of San Juan, protecting the land approaches to the city.

During Cumberland's attack there were two fortified points at the eastern end of San Juan. The point at El Boqueron is called a "bastion" by Cumberland and "a small fort" by Layfield. The other fortified point was located at San Antonio bridge. The "fort" or "bastion" is referred to by Layfield as "Fuerte Rojo" and "Mata Diablo." "Fuerte Rojo" suggests a structure built of red brick or a wooden one painted red. The name "Mata Diablo" may have been given the fort because the Spaniards thought Sir John

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Hawkins had been killed by the fire of its guns at
the time of Drake's attack.¹³ During the attack
El Boqueron was so severely damaged that the landing
parties of the invaders anchored their boats in its
vicinity without any difficulty. It was defended
unsuccessfully by 50 musketeers.¹⁴

During the governorship of Don Gabriel de Rojas
(1608-1614) the defenses of San Juan were strengthened
considerably, including the eastern fortifications.
Rojas constructed a new fort at El Boqueron or recon-
structed the one that had been partially destroyed
during the 1598 attack.¹⁵

In 1625, during the Dutch attack, Governor Juan de
Haro considered the defense of the Boqueron Point of
utmost importance as he feared a repetition of
Cumberland's assault. He gave orders to transfer
2 pieces of artillery from El Morro to reinforce the
"post" of El Boqueron.¹⁶ These were supplemented with
trenches where a large number of soldiers were stationed.
The "post" is not mentioned in the Dutch and Spanish
accounts of the attack in relation to military activities.¹⁷

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But the Dutch account is accompanied by a map in which¹⁸
El Boqueron "post" is shown.

We have not been able to find information on El Boqueron from 1625 to 1731. This is a period of transition¹⁹
in the history of the fortifications of San Juan.

In a report dated 1731 and issued by the Spanish military engineers of San Juan, the name of San Geronimo Fort is used for the first time in relation to a structure built at El Boqueron Point. It only states that the roof of²⁰
the living quarters needed repairs.

The maps and plans available from 1747 to 1776,²¹ due to their small size, do not contain much information on San Geronimo Fort. It is shown as a small square bordered²²
by irregular walls. In two maps from 1785 it is still a square but has a small bastion in each corner.

Around 1788 the military engineer Don Ignacio Mascaro y Homar, did some work on San Geronimo, possibly repair-²³
ing the damages caused by the earthquake of 1787.

There is evidence that in 1792²⁴ the Spanish military engineers worked on San Geronimo again in preparation of a British attack which finally came in 1797. During the invasion San Geronimo functioned importantly in the

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checking the attempts of Sir Ralph Abercromby to
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land his invading forces.

On July 15, 1921, Lieutenant Commander Virgil Baker, U. S. N., Retired, his heirs and assigns, was granted a 999 years lease under special authority of Congress, of a tract of land known as San Geronimo Naval Reservation which included San Geronimo Fort. This action originated a series of law suits culminating in the Insular government issuing a declaration of taking for the fort itself in 1949 and assuming possession. The partial price payment accepted by Commander Baker was \$35,000. The case is still pending hearing in the federal court.

In the second half of the 19th century a wooden house was built on the upper level of the fort, as quarters for the commanding officers of San Geronimo. It was destroyed in the San Ciriaco Hurricane, 1899, three years after the Spanish American war, at which time the fort was transferred to the U. S. Navy Department. The house was replaced by a second wood structure which in its time was torn down in 1949.

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BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

1. This is our best available evidence.
2. A Military Board that met in 1587 to study the problem of the fortifications of San Juan.
3. Archivo General de Indias - Patronato 18, no. 13, R.O.2. This report of Menéndez was used by the military engineer Antonelli in the execution of the plan of fortification of 1591.
4. Boletín Histórico de Puerto Rico, Founder-Director, Cayetano Coll y Toste (Cantero Fernández and Co. Press, San Juan, Puerto Rico, 1914-1927), 14 vols. IV, 321.
5. Hoyt, Edward A., A History of the Harbor Defenses of San Juan under Spain, 1509-1898, etc. (San Juan, Puerto Rico, 1943), 42.
6. During Drake's attack it was a wooden structure, that connected San Juan with the mainland of Puerto Rico.
7. The two other batteries, besides those of El Boquerón and the bridge were: Cabrón Cove, located between the Escambrón Point and El Boquerón; Morrillo Cove, near the eastern end of San Juan. See Fray Inigo Abbad y Lasierra, Historia Geográfica, Civil y Natural de la Isla de San Juan de Puerto Rico (new edition by Acosta), 162-164, as cited by Hoyt, op. cit; 44-45. The bridge position was at the site of the future San Antonio Fort.
8. Boletín Histórico de Puerto Rico, op. cit; V, 42, 44. See also the plan of Cumberland's attack reproduced in Rafael W. Ramírez de Arellano, La Capital a través de los Siglos, 1950.
9. Red Fort.
10. Devil Killer.
11. Hoyt, op. cit; 52, note 56
12. Adolfo de Hostos, Ciudad Murada (Editorial Lex, La Habana, 1948), 179.
13. Hoyt, op. cit; 52, note 56, citing Inigo Abbad y Lasierra, op. cit; 163-164.
14. Boletín Histórico de Puerto Rico, op. cit; V, 47, 48.

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15. Archivo General de Indias - Santo Domingo 155-1.
16. Boletín Histórico de Puerto Rico, op. cit; IV, 230.
17. For the Spanish account see Ibid. Both, the Spanish and the Dutch accounts are reproduced in Fernando Géigel Sabat, Balduino Enrico (Barcelona, 1934).
18. The map is reproduced in Géigel Sabat, op. cit; 100
19. See the author's preliminary report, La Plaza de Puerto Rico, 1765-1777 (National Park Service, San Juan, Puerto Rico, 1952), 19.
20. Archivo General de Indias - Santo Domingo 2499.
21. "Mapa de la Plaza de San Juan de Puerto Rico y sus contornos, etc.," Francisco Valdelomar, 1747; "Plano de la Plaza de San Juan de Puerto Rico," Tomas O'Daly, 1772; "Mapa de la Plaza de San Juan de Puerto Rico, etc.," Tomas O'Daly, 1776.
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23. Salvador Brau, Historia de Puerto Rico (D. Appleton and Co., New York, 1914), 197.
24. Relación de Fortificación (Copia inedita, propiedad de Rafael W. Ramírez).
25. Boletín Histórico de Puerto Rico, op. cit; XIII-XIV, 202, 236.

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NOTE: The Brief History and the Bibliography were prepared by the Historian (Park), San Juan NHS. All other written data was prepared by the Architect, San Juan NHS.

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